The Gates of Morning

CHAPTER I - The Canoe Builder

Upon a coral ledge drenched in sunlight, Dick stood motionless, his gaze cast southward.

Behind him, the breakers of the vast outer sea roared their eternal thunder, flinging spindrift to the wind. Before him, serene and endless, the lagoon of Karolin stretched like a polished mirror-azure, vast, and alive with circling gulls.

Encircled by a forty-mile reef of coral, this inland sea was a world of its own: tempestuous under fierce gales, tranquil and shimmering beneath gentle breezes. And now, it belonged to him. He had arrived only the day before.

Scattered along the sun-drenched shore were the people-women, children, and youths-casting nets, laughing in games, tending the paraka patches. They were his people now. The canoes resting upon the beach were his. Even the hollowed-out shelters where war canoes once stood belonged to him.

Yet as his eyes moved from the peaceful lagoon to the vacant canoe houses, his brow furrowed. He turned to face the tumultuous breakers and the northern sea beyond. Somewhere past that distant, unseen horizon lay Palm Tree Island-lovely, dreamlike, yet cursed with evil.

Nearby, little Tari, the son of Le Taioi the net maker, sat cross-legged on the coral. Though still a child, he understood the void left by the men lost to war. The village was leaderless, a driftwood people in need of a rudder.

Then, as if summoned by fate, Dick had arrived yesterday in a strange boat with Katafa-the long-lost girl who had vanished at sea. The women, whispering of omens and gods, declared him sent from the divine to be their new chief.

Tari, knowing nothing of gods but much of curiosity, asked with the simplicity only a child possesses, "Taori, who are you?" (e kamina tai)

Had Dick the words-and had the boy understood-his answer would have been a tale strange and otherworldly.
"I am Dick Lestrange, child. Long ago, I was left on Marua-your Palm Tree-with an old sailor named Kearney. There I learned the sea, its moods and gifts. Kearney crafted for me wondrous playthings-little ships unlike any canoe. Then one day, Katafa appeared, carried by the storm, and remained with us until Kearney passed. We were alone but whole. She taught me the speech of Karolin, named me Taori, and we lived in peace... until a ship arrived, bearing men of Melanesia, who turned violent. We fled in our little boat, taking what we loved-and the sea brought us here."

But the past for Dick was no longer words. His old name-Dick-had slipped from his mind, dissolved in the white blaze of tropical memory. Even Kearney, the one who had raised him, was but a ghost of sensation, sustained only by the memory of the little ships he built.

Looking down at the wide-eyed child, Dick simply said, "I am Taori, Tari tatu. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know," the child replied. "I ask as I breathe. But no big folk-madyana-answer Tari." Then, distracted by shouts from children pulling in a net, he ran off.

Dick turned again toward the north. The boy's question stirred deep echoes. He saw once more the

Melanesian mutiny, the burning schooner, the wild flight across the sea, the women and children who had welcomed him as a savior.

But even now, the vision of Palm Tree clouded the bright horizon. He knew they-those savage men-would build canoes. Someday, they would see the same sky-blaze of Karolin's lagoon and they would come. Not soon, perhaps, but they would come.

Dick, though raised among islanders, still bore the spark of the white man. He could think forward, weigh consequences, anticipate. That morning, he had sent a canoe southward to fetch Aioma, Palia, and Tafata-aged masters of canoe craft. He had also marked the growing strength of the boys nearing manhood. All of it, every calculation, was driven by a single blazing force: his love for Katafa, his other self, more sacred than his own life.

Would he wait for the enemy to arrive? Or strike first, destroy the threat before it could take shape? Even he did not yet know.

Then a hand touched his shoulder.

He turned to find Katafa beside him, her dark hair caught in the wind, her eyes fixed toward the northern horizon where he had been looking.

"Look," she said.

Far away, faint and blurred by sun and distance, the mirage of Palm Tree Island appeared. A shadow on the sea-sky, it gathered form, resolving into the ghostly outline of an island as lovely as a vision.

Together, wordless, they stared-he with dread, she with memory. They remembered the monstrous shapes of drunken Melanesians, the wind in their sail as they fled, the yells, the flames, and the terror. Now the island rose before them once more, beautiful and damning.

Dick's face hardened. They had threatened him-he could forgive that. But they had threatened Katafa.

And they would come. He was sure of it. Not just because of lust or conquest, but because he knew instinctively what such men wanted. He had learned the first law of history: the hunger of men to take what they desire.

Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, Palm Tree vanished-like a candle extinguished. And Katafa, with the calm of a priestess, pointed across the lagoon to a canoe approaching from the south.

The canoe builders had come.